CHRYSLER CENTER, Plant 4
Highland Park
Wayne County
Michigan

HAER No. MI-142-B

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Great Lakes Systems Office
Department of the Interior
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
CHRYSLER CENTER, Plant 4 (Service Machinery Building)

Location: Quad: Highland Park, Michigan 1:24,000

UTM: 17.328760.4696380

Dates of Construction: 1916-1917, 1918-1919, 1926, 1948

Architects: Maxwell Motor Company Construction Department, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, and others.

Builders: Hazelton Clark Company, General Contractors, Detroit, Michigan and others; Russel Wheel & Foundry Company, Detroit

Present Owner: The Chrysler Corporation
800 Chrysler Drive East
Auburn Hills, MI 48326

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The oldest segment of this building was an assembly plant for the Maxwell automobile in 1916-1925. The Chrysler Corporation assembled Chrysler automobiles here in 1925-1928, along with the company s Fargo truck line in 1928. Chrysler used the building to assemble Plymouth and DeSoto models in 1928 and 1929 before converting it into an engineering testing facility. It is a typical twentieth-century steel-framed manufacturing building found in Detroit auto plants, with numerous additions made to it over the years.

Historian: Charles K. Hyde, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202, February-May 1997

The Brush Runabout Company Building was standing on this site by 1910, when it appeared on a site plan showing the property of the United State Motor Company in Highland Park. Alanson Partridge Brush (1878-1952) designed a reliable, inexpensive automobile in 1906 and licensed the Detroit automaker Frank Briscoe to manufacture the car under license. This was one of three Detroit factories of the Brush Runabout Company, which produced this popular model in 1906-1912. The 1910 site plan shows an attached boiler house on the south side of the factory and a small detached office fronting on Oakland Avenue. The 1915 Sanborn fire insurance map shows a rectangular structure with brick walls, iron columns, and a series of skylights admitting north light. The building measured 150 by 960 . It is identified in the 1915 Sanborn as an assembly building, part of Maxwell Motor Company, Inc. Oakland Avenue Plant No. 1. Two new buildings constructed since 1910 were also shown, both housing Japanning ovens, the method used to apply lacquered paint to car bodies.[1]

A 1921 site plan showing the greatly-enlarged factory complex of the Maxwell Motor Corporation shows this building keeping its rectangular configuration, but enlarged to more than twice its 1910 size with large additions (1916) on the north and east sides and smaller additions (1919) on the west end. The building contained the final assembly operations for the Maxwell car and included repair lines, a final inspection area, storage areas for bodies and other components, and rear axle and wire assembly areas. One small area was designated for truck assembly. A large sheet metal plant (Plant No. 3) built in 1920, but no longer extant, was attached at the southwest side of the existing building, giving the structure as a whole an L-shape.[2]

The building had exactly the same configuration in 1925 as in 1921, but was identified in 1925 as the building where the Chrysler Car was assembled. The next site plan, dating from the end of 1928 identified the building as the location for the assembly of the Plymouth car and the DeSoto automobile. A very large addition on the north side of the 1917 section, identified as the Fargo Truck Plant and dated 1926, nearly doubled the size of the building. The Chrysler Corporation announced a new line of Fargo trucks and commercial cars (delivery vehicles) in September 1928. We know little about this line of trucks, except that the nameplate survived until 1937 and Chrysler made them in Detroit.[3]

The June 1949 site plans shows the same configuration as in 1928, with the building split into three functional areas--Plant No. 3 - Sheet Metal; Plant No. 4 - Service Machinery; and Plant No. 5 - Rear Axle and Screw Machinery. The surviving buildings are a mixture of the numerous additions and alteration made over the years. Plant No. 3 (Smith, Hinchman, & Grylls, 1920) is entirely gone. The surviving Plant 4 is really a combination of Plants 4 and 5 from the 1949 site plan. Today, Plant 4 consists of Building 207 (1916-1917), which measures 130 0 X 1321 4 ; Building 216 (1927), measuring 260 8 X 1321 4 ; Building 237 (1918); Building 206 (1919); and Buildings 246 (53 10 X 280 8) and 247, the last two built in 1948 on the site of the 1909 Brush Runabout Company building. Building 246 is a steel-framed, high-roof building equipped with 20-ton capacity crane and was used to manufacture dies. Given the changing uses of the entire Highland Park complex from 1909 to the 1990s and the central location of Plant 4, the numerous changes to these buildings over the years are not surprising.[4]

The architect of the various sections of Plant 4 cannot be determined with absolute certainty. Albert Kahn Associates Job Book does not list a single job for either the Brush Runabout Company or the Maxwell Motor Company. The Chrysler Center plant engineering office has a few plans for Maxwell Motor Buildings No. 16 and 17, plus additions to both. These are dated 15 July 1916, 16 October 1917, and 12 May 1919, all produced by the Maxwell Motor Company Construction Department. The plans show various parts of the building and all have sawtooth roof monitors occupying (standard) bays 26 0 wide and supplied by the Russel Wheel & Foundry Company of Detroit. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls designed a lunchroom on the roof of Building 216 in April 1928 and may have designed other parts of the building as well.

The interior of Plant 4 bears little resemblance to its original appearance, mainly because the space has been divided into hundreds of offices and storage spaces with partitions of cinder block, steel, and glass. The glass panels on the roof monitors, designed to admit north light, are all either painted or covered, and the entire space is lit artificially. The original roof trusses remain in place, but none of the windows are operable, even thought the mechanical equipment, all hand cranked, remains in place throughout much of the building.

Almost none of the original interior building fabric has survived the countless alterations made over the years. The easternmost sections of Buildings 207 and 247 were converted into modern office space in 1968, creating a maze of offices 103 wide and 460 long overall. The western segments of the same buildings became the plant cafeteria and kitchens in 1971, resulting in another modern space 132 X 230 overall. These two modernizations used almost all of the space in Buildings 207 and 247. Most of Building 216 was also converted into offices, laboratories, and storage space between 1965 and 1978, destroying any original industrial fabric that may have survived from earlier times.[5]

NOTES

[1]George S. May, Alanson Partridge Brush, in May, editor, The Automobile Industry, 1896-1920, pp. 54-59; Robert S. Danilovich, Location and Distribution of Defunct Automobile Plants in Detroit, 1900-1956, M.A. Thesis, Central Michigan University, Department of Geography, 1974, pp. 66-68; and Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan, Part 10 (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1915).

[2]These and later site plans were found in an unpublished typescript, A History of Events Leading Up to the Formation of the Chrysler Corporation, With Charts Showing Changes in the Highland Park Area and Items of General Interest in Connection With the Growth of the Automobile Industry, compiled by the Budget Office of the Highland Park Manufacturing Division, September 4, 1952. This document is in the Chrysler Historical Collections. The builder of the sheet metal plant is identified in a June 1919 construction photograph of the building found in the National Automotive History Collection at the Detroit Public Library. The 1919 sawtooth-roofed additions may have been designed by the Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls.

A Selected Job List for the firm shows work for the Maxwell Motor Company at its Oakland Avenue Plant. See Thomas J. Holleman and James P. Gallagher, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls: 125 Years of Architecture and Engineering, 1853-1978 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), p. 211.

[3] Chrysler Adds Fargo Trucks: Widens Production to Take in Commercial Car Types; Shipments Begun, The Detroit News, 23 September 1928, Section 10, p. 3; Newest Chrysler Vehicle, The Detroit News, 21 October 1928, Section 10, p. 4; and James and Genevieve Wren, Motor Trucks of America (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1979), p.361.

[4]The historic site plans are attached to an unpublished typescript, A History of Events Leading Up to the Formation of the Chrysler Corporation, With Charts Showing Changes in the Highland Park Area and Items of General Interest in Connection With the Growth of the Automobile Industry, compiled by the Budget Office of the Highland Park Manufacturing Division, September 4, 1952, located in the Chrysler Historical Collections. Another valuable source of information is a Property, Buildings, and Facilities Record Form, Primary Buildings, probably prepared by the plant engineering staff, dated December 31, 1991.

[5]The principle alterations are listed in the Property, Building and Facilities Record Form: Primary Buildings, produced by the plant engineering office for the Chrysler Center, dated December 31, 1991.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

See the list of sources for the overview report.

HIGHLAND PARK, MICHIGAN QUADRANGLE, 1:24,000

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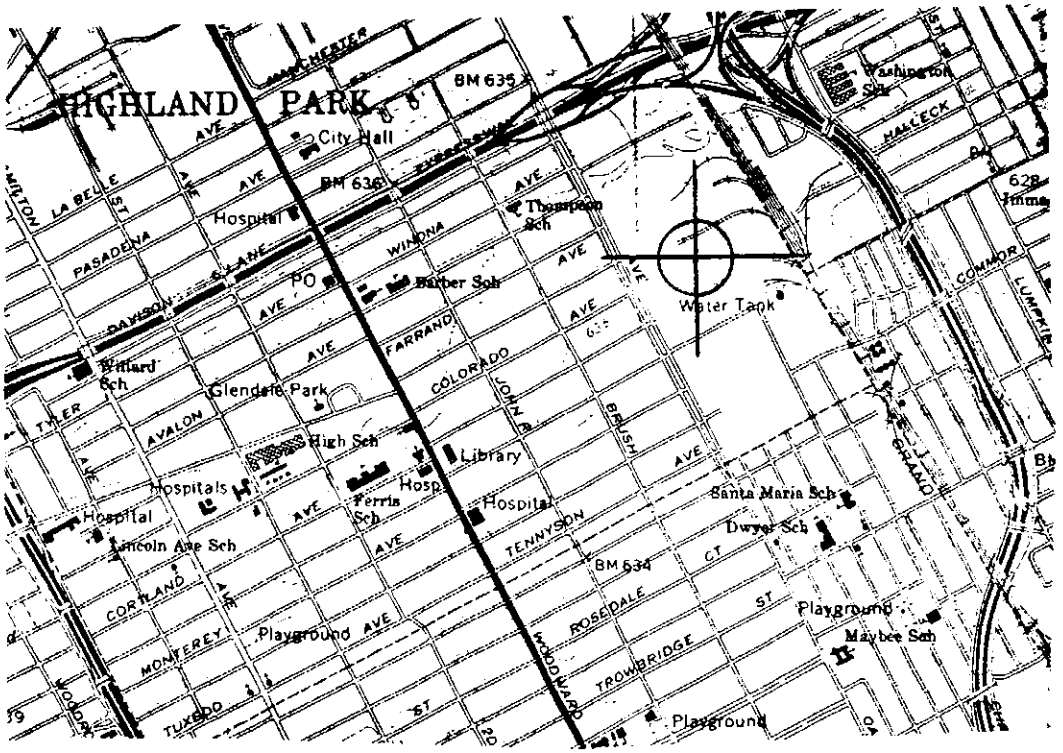

GENERAL FLOOR PLAN